



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
100 Cambridge Street, Suite 900
Boston, MA 02114

Maura T. Healey
GOVERNOR

Kimberley Driscoll
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

Rebecca L. Tepper
SECRETARY

Tel: (617) 626-1000
Fax: (617) 626-1081
<http://www.mass.gov/eea>

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Commissioner Elizabeth Mahony
Department of Energy Resources
Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs

Re: Grid Modernization Advisory Council - Equity and Environmental Justice

Dear Commissioner, Mahony:

The Environmental Justice Office under the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs appreciates the opportunity to submit comments to the Grid Modernization Advisory Council regarding equity implications of investor-owned electric distribution companies and their electric-sector modernization plans (ESMPs).

Environmental justice is about people; it is about residents who have historically been marginalized and excluded from public processes. It is also about the disproportionate burdens and harms some communities have had to shoulder. The environmental justice movement in the United States was born out of the civil rights movement, as a response to deeply seeded inequities. While we have made incredible progress when it comes to civil rights, the ramifications of racism and classism are still felt and lived by many. The essence of the environmental justice movement is about undoing the harms and reversing decades of both environmental racism and classism. In Massachusetts an "Environmental Justice population" is defined as a neighborhood where one or more of the following criteria are true:

- the annual income is 65% or less than statewide median income
- minorities make up 40% or more of the population
- 25% or more of the households speak English less than "very well"
- minorities make up 25 percent or more of the population and the annual median household income of the municipality in which the neighborhood is located does not exceed 150 percent of the statewide annual median household income.

When implementing environmental justice policies, outcomes are as important as processes. One of the main principles of environmental justice is that residents who have historically been excluded and marginalized should have a seat at the decision-making table. EJ populations should be engaged in public processes from the very beginning, not as an after-thought, and the engagement must be coupled with meaningful outcomes and results. Adding equity or community outreach as a final step in the

process does not allow for a meaningful process. Successful community outreach happens when the voices and perspective of those most vulnerable are reflected in the outcome.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of best practices for community engagement:

- All neighborhoods who might be impacted by a project should be engaged. Community meetings should be held in the neighborhoods where the project will be located or impacted. They should take place in community friendly locations, ones that are commonly used for community events. They should also be scheduled during different times of day, considering residents living in environmental justice neighborhoods may be working more two to three jobs to make ends meet and don't have a typical 9AM-5PM schedule. Whenever possible community meetings should be scheduled during late afternoon/evening hours and/or weekends.
- Written materials and presentations should not include acronyms. Any technical language should be written and spoken in a way so that residents who do not work in the field of energy generation, transmission or distribution can easily understand.
- All materials, including notices, slides, handouts should be translated (written form) into the languages spoken in the neighborhoods. All meetings should also provide simultaneous interpretation (verbal form) into the languages spoken in the neighborhoods where the project is being proposed and where the meeting is taking place. Multilingual staff whose primary job is not translation/interpretation should not be asked to translate/interpret unless they are certified translators/interpreters and are compensated accordingly.
- Outreach should include notices and flyers publicized in commonly used medium including local newspapers (including multilingual newspapers), social media, local TV channels, churches, senior centers, schools, community centers and other community organizations and gathering spaces.
- Community meetings should also include the following logistical arrangements to ensure robust participation: food, childcare, transportation, and virtual options. Community meetings should include dinner, lunch, or snacks. Providing childcare allows for working parents or grandparents to attend community meetings with their children. Not providing childcare assumes residents have someone at home to watch for their kids, or the resources to hire a childcare provider. Transportation is also a key barrier to ensuring participation. Community meetings should take place near public transit stops so that transit riders can attend. The cost of public transit should also be covered, otherwise those who do not own a car will need to spend money out of their pocket to pay for a bus/train ride in order to participate. Finally, community meetings should be in person with a virtual option. Remote-only meetings present many barriers for residents with limited internet or electronic devices. In-person meetings are recommended, with a virtual option for those residents living with disabilities or who are immunocompromised.

In addition to engaging EJ communities in a meaningful way, below are some key pillars that address inequities that environmental justice populations face in the energy sector.

Affordability

In ensuring a just transition, affordability is a key. Energy burden is defined as the ratio between energy cost and household income. According to the Department of Energy, the national average for energy burden is 3%. In Massachusetts, low-income residents pay an average of 10% of their household income on energy bills. In some neighborhood, the burden is as high as 30%. To ensure a just transition, we must protect low-income residents and people of color from carrying an inequitable energy burden.

Workforce Development

As the clean energy economy grows, electric distribution companies should ensure their workforce is inclusive of Black, Brown, Immigrant, Indigenous and low-income residents. As we grow the workforce needed to electrify the grid, EJ populations must have access to good paying and stable jobs. This includes creating a permanent pathway for residents who currently work in fossil fuel industries so they can transition to new clean energy jobs, as well as a pathway for the younger generations and those who have historically not had access to energy sector jobs.

Cumulative Impact Analyses and Community Benefit Agreements

As we modernize the grid and transition to 100% clean energy, we will need additional infrastructure. Where and how we build and site the infrastructure will have significant implications. Cumulative Impact Analyses are clear way to understand which communities, neighborhoods or block groups already carry a disproportionate burden. When planning for new energy infrastructure or enhancement of existing ones, we must ensure we are not causing additional harm to those who have historically been overburdened. When possible and if feasible, if a project may cause additional harm or burden on EJ populations, an alternative site should be identified.

A just transition includes a proactive approach to mitigating harm on communities who already carry a disproportion cumulative burden. Developing community benefit agreements early in the process and that reflect the needs of a community, are a meaningful way to engage a neighborhood that will host the infrastructures. We will all benefit from a clean and reliable grid, but not every neighborhood is the host to energy infrastructure. We must ensure those neighborhoods living next to energy sector infrastructure see a direct benefit to their community. Community benefit agreements are a great model to follow.

Operationalizing environmental justice can be complex and seem burdensome. However, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transition to a clean energy economy is a just and equitable one.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. Please do not hesitate to contact our office if you have clarifying questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "María Belén Power". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

María Belén Power
Undersecretary of Environmental Justice and Equity
Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs